

Humor as a Mirroring Self- Reflection

A Case Study of Subversive Deaf Humor Aiming the Spotlight at the
Hearing Majority

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Abstract

Humor builds the ground to share the common and the uncommon, to ease the uneasiness, to laugh at oneself and the other. It is amusing and rebellious, revealing the obvious from the obscure and challenging the unchallenged. The purpose of this Master thesis is to examine the subversive humor use within Deaf communities, centered around the hearing society, as well as to explore subversive humor's role in reinforcing the Deaf identity and resisting the often assigned *otherness*. Taken the form of a case study this thesis analyses two examples: a short film *The Kiss*, produced by Charlie Swinbourne and the series of graphical drawings from *Tais*, created by Alícia Sort Leal. Using visual analysis and close reading as analytical methods as well as classical (Superiority, Incongruity, Relief) and contemporary (Reversal) humor theories, this thesis provides an insight into reflective and mirroring effects of humor.

Key words: Deaf humor, Humor theories, Otherness, Deaf Culture, Deaf Identity, Disability, Intersectional gender studies.

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Introduction

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. (Bakhtin, 1981:58)

Humor has been explored as a cultural expression that provides a distorted mirror of the both mind and society (Chapman & Foot, 1996). And who does not enjoy a good laugh every once in a while? The moment of relief, when the tension in the joke functions as an elastic band resulting the “bodily explosion”, as the philosopher Simon Critchley (2002:7) would say, without a doubt is an enjoyable one. Despite its comic relief functionality, humor can also be used as a critical reflection on the established order of the society (Critchley, 2002). When used in the social context, humor becomes a complex tool, carrying ironic and historical truths resulting a laugh, being an icebreaker in uncomfortable situations or bringing up reflections on some topics that often are silenced taboos. The latter “threatens any society”, becoming a “suitable topic for humor” (Suttone-Spence & Napoli, 2012:313).

While disability can certainly seem to be a threatening topic from the political correctness standards, it is a dominant genre in comedy, aiming for a “thought provoking” laughter (Reid, Stoughton & Smith, 2006). On the other hand, when used in the reversed form by those who remain in the socially constructed category of the disabled “other”, humor assists in self- empowerment and challenges existing stereotypes (Smith & Sapon-Shevin, 2018).

My decision in writing about Deaf culture was greeted with a wide encouragement from my hearing comrades, who seem to have understood it as an act of representation of those who cannot represent themselves. This was in fact the reason why I did not want to write about it at first. This is also the reason why I wrote about it. The traditional assumption that the *subaltern* is mute and requires to be represented has been challenged by the feminist cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) critique *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in which she ironically questions

the politics of representation of the *Other*. Similarly, the feminist postcolonial theorist and science scholar Donna Haraway (1992) problematizes the traditional politics of representation and proposes instead a politics of articulation, and most crucially, an epistemology of *situated knowledges* (p.313) that is not founded on identity politics. That being said, instead of looking for speaker on behalf of the *other*, perhaps it is us who first should learn to listen to difference?

This thesis will explore the usage of the subversive humor about cultures of resistance within the Deaf communities, reviewing the existing literature surrounding the Deaf humor as well expanding it further and thus hopefully making a small contribution to an under-researched topic of intersectional Gender Studies.

1.1. Aims and Research Questions

The point of departure within this study focuses on the humor usage within the Deaf community. While Deaf community holds a strong Deaf identity which is often *othered* in the hearing majority, my aim is to analyze how humor can be used as a tool to understand and reinforce the Deaf identity as well as resist this *otherness*.

The study will take place in a form of close reading and visual analysis of two samples of Deaf community humor: a short film *The Kiss*, produced by Charlie Swinbourne as well as a series of graphical drawings of *Tais*, fictional character and an alter-ego of the Catalan Deaf artist Alícia.

My interests here are in examining the versatility and usage of Deaf humor, as it gets constructed about the hearing society, are framed by the following research questions:

1. Does Deaf culture hold up a mirror to the hearing society? If so, how?
2. To what extent does Deaf humor contribute to the deconstruction of the *otherness* when used as a subversive tool?

Before proceeding forward with the examination of the research questions outlined above, I am going to introduce the historical background of the concerned topic, methodological approach which will be used in the analysis as well as my own positionality within the researched topic.

Historical Background and Methodology

In the following section I will first elaborate on the historical construction of the *other* and relate it to disability discourse, as an emerging area of interest for intersectional analysis (Hirschmann, 2012). Following that, I will provide an overview on the oppression of the deafness and the emergence of the Deaf identity, combining with its relation to disability. Additionally, I will demonstrate the historical and contemporary links between visibility and Deaf culture. Finally, this chapter will be concluded with my chosen methodologies, limitations as well as situatedness within the chosen topic.

2.1. Otherness, Disability and Deafness

Classical universalist ideals, such as those set up by philosopher Aristotle, have forged historical ideas and social norms of a perfect human body. By the same token, this has also given rise to an array of faulty and imperfect bodies, bodies lacking in humanness, such as female, queer, crip or colored, colonized or working bodies as less human than suggested by the ideal. In her classical critique on the patriarchal social structure *The Second Sex* (1949), the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir addressed the social construction of the category of women as the *Other* to the norm-human category of the *Subject* and *Absolute -He* (Beauvoir, 2011:26). The concept had been further deployed in the postcolonial critiques, for instance, in Spivak's (1988) *Can The Subaltern Speak?*, in which she critically reveals the construction of the subaltern *Other*, defined as not being able to speak for itself and in need to be represented by the *European Subject* (p.70). These bodies, othered by the master narratives and the classical humanism have been inserted into the hierarchical structure of the social powers, defined and derogated by their differences, so that being "different from" have in practice come to mean "less valuable than" (Braidotti, 1994a:147; 2007b:66-67).

Henceforth, a new field of research has been examined by the contemporary critical body and feminist scholars. In the field of critical disability studies, the historian Catherine Kudlick (2003) turns the disability and other forms of corporeal difference, from the imagined norm into a "critique

of the social body” (p.766), of society per se. An alternative to this is the affirmative ethics of scholars like Rosi Braidotti, affirming difference but not their derogatory and hierarchical deployment. These ethics have also translated into critical d/Deaf studies (Kudlick, 2003). For instance, classical Aristotelian notions of deafness as deficiency of hearing and speech viewed the deaf person as “being *less*, rather than being *different*” (Fulka, 2020:20) in terms of not being able to articulate speech and therefore being seen as an animal rather than human. The formula of communication for Aristotle consisted of language, being produced by sounds as the equivalents to voice, leading to speech. Subtracting the speech from the formula interrupted the language construction and therefore, in the view of the Greek philosopher, deaf people were unable to produce language and communicate: “All persons who are deaf from birth are dumb as well: though they can utter a sort of voice, they cannot talk.” (Aristotle 1970:IV, 9,536b, cited in Fulka, 2020:20). The socially constructed view on deaf people as being in lack of communication and intelligence had not been challenged up until the sixteenth century, which marked a complex split towards the d/Deaf education throughout the modern history (Schein & Stewart, 2011).

While the Gallaudet University marks a significant moment in Deaf history by becoming the first university for the Deaf in Washington DC, United States in 1864 and offering the education in the American Sign Language, its opponents rose the issue of “speech versus sign” (Scheine & Stewart, 2011:20) which lead to the prohibition of the sign language by the Milan Congress of 1880. Applying the oral approach and teaching speech as well as speech reading became the goal in Europe and the United States up until the 1960 (Schein & Stewart, 2011). The ‘oralist’ movement not only aimed the deaf to “assimilate into the hearing world” (Ferndale et al. 2016:468), it *othered* the deaf by attenuating the use of sign language and constructing the deafness as a pathological condition: viewing deaf people as “suffering a hearing loss and as being hearing impaired rather than deaf” (Branson & Miller, 2002:203). As a result, the medical condition required a cure and the technological appliance of the hearings aids as well as cochlear implants were thought to ‘stimulate the hearing’ which would allow the deaf person to “participate actively in the hearing world” (p.228). Deafness was, in the terms of feminist science and technology studies scholar Adèle Clarke, *medicalized* (Clarke et al.,2010). Medical technologies in society set the standards for normal or diseased/atypical embodiment. And as feminist scholars of medicalization have noted, with the development of capitalist pharmaceutical or biotechnical industries, increasing

domains of the corporeal have been increasingly medicalized or deemed unwell, in need of “fixing”. As medical philosopher Björn Hofmann (2001) puts it: the “*technê metriké* of the modern age, [has become] the measure of what is good and bad, what is to be treated and not, and hence, what is diseased and what is not” (p.17-18). Constructed in and by the “non-disabled world” (Kudlick, 2003:776), the ‘*in*-ability’ is assimilated with ‘*dis*-ability’ (p.769), setting up a limited understanding of the concept, even today.

The disability theorists oppose and exchange the assigned meaning of ‘disadvantage’ to disability with the term ‘difference’ (Hirschmann, 2012). The difference however is not a “bodily difference itself- [...], but rather the social context in which they exist” (p.398), meaning that is socially constructed. In regards to deafness in particular, the feminist and disability theories scholar Nancy Hirschmann distinguishes between Deaf communities and their preservation of sign language, versus the usage of cochlear implants, which are “hard- wired” into the brain to create sound waves to enable deaf people to “hear” (p.398), denying deafness as a disability. The later concept, indeed, has a “fraught” relationship with deafness and the d/Deaf, resulting the concept of disability being often rejected and replaced with “positive identity” (Kudlick, 2003:782).

2.2. Turning the Otherness into a Cultural Identity

As observed by Deaf studies scholar Breda Carty (1994), the journey of the identity search starts by asking questions of “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” (p.40). The breakaway from deafness being ascribed as a “pathological characteristic” rather than a “social category” (Kudlick, 2003:781), can be traced back to the American Deaf Activist movements in the 1980s, which made the sign language as well as the Deaf culture to be accepted as “ethnic groups” and deaf people as “active agents in their own fate” (p.781). Deaf identity and the need of bilingual and bicultural education became the key aims in the Deaf culture’s development agenda (Leigh, 2019). The collective Deaf identity, defined by the acceptance of deafness as an “essential, positive part of oneself”, the recognition of Deaf culture and Sign Language/s as well the interpretation of the world through the Deaf experience, is necessary for the personal empowerment, according to Carty (1994:41). Within the Deaf world, the capital ‘D’ in Deaf represents identification with the Deaf community and culture, defined by the usage of sign languages, as well as “shared values and

beliefs” (Gangwish, 2019:2). The lowercase ‘d’ is used a generic term to describe the hearing loss and refers to deaf who do not necessarily identify with the Deaf culture, and who may use “sign language, speech, or a combination of the two” (Nickels, 2016:3). In other words, the Deaf culture is defined by a “personal decision” (Gangwish, 2019:2), meaning that multiple identities can be acquired “contradicting dominant binary constructions of deafness” (Ferndale, Munro & Watson, 2016:485). For the purpose of this study, the capital ‘D’ will be used when referring to Deaf as a cultural identity.

2.3. Visual Deaf Culture

Deaf culture and its visual language are inseparable from the visual culture. In his book *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign and Visual Culture in Modern France* (1995), visual cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff explores the intersection between art and visual signs in the works of Deaf artists of the 19th century France. The emergence of the monolithic culture during the evolutionism and its authorization during the Milan Congress of 1880, gave a rise to a second wave of Deaf artists and sculptors (Mirzoeff, 1995:139). Resisting the category of “primitive” and the hearing majority skepticism, Deaf artists used the “cachet of high art” (p.3). Deaf art however was not promoted by the art museums of the late 19th century, as such institutions did not celebrate the *subaltern* culture. Instead, they were “classified and made explicable for the civilized” (p.199). Through its oppositions, such as “high/low, avant-garde/modern, Academic/modern” (p.230) late 19th and early 20th century Modernism excluded Deaf artists’ visual representations from the modern visual culture. Deaf modernism, according to Mirzoeff has deconstructed the essentialist concept of visual culture being dependent on speech as well as brought new ways of apprehending visual culture, which can be understood only now (p.254).

The new visual culture for Mirzoeff (1998) is the “visualization of things that are not in themselves visual” (p.6), placing the experiences of the everyday into the center. According to Betty G. Miller (1989), the first Deaf American to exhibit art about Deaf experiences and the pioneer of Deaf View/Image Art (De’VIA) genre, visual art in Deaf cultural context, can “enlighten Deaf and hearing observers by presenting experiences reflective of a Deaf person’s world view” (Miller, 1989:770, cited in Durr, 2006:167). Deaf practices of everyday therefore are reflected in variety

of visual representation genres in contemporary culture, such as films, graphical novels and cartoons, theatre, visual poetry, paintings, sculpture, etc, maintaining a strong link between visual and Deaf cultures.

2.4. Methodology and Limitations: Visual Analysis and Close Reading

In an attempt to analyze the theme of subversive Deaf humor and its reflections on the hearing society, I will employ the qualitative methodological approaches of visual analysis and close reading of both, the short film *The Kiss* as well as the series of images from the graphical novel *Tais*. While both methodological approaches are similar in their interpretive practices, they complement each other well by drawing a link between visual and textual interpretation. Cultural theorist Mieke Bal (2008) points out that social life is inspired by “what we see- or think we see” (p.4), therefore the analysis of visual events represented in the images can subvert socially damaging powers of pre-programmed *others*, depicted in their *otherness*. On the other hand, visual images can also be used as manipulative tools due to the interpretive possibility to overlook the unambiguous meanings (p.4).

Drawing on the gender studies scholar Heather Love’s (2010) thought on the hermeneutic methods in research, I agree with her that the text “is both an access to otherness and a message or call to attention” (p.371). Close reading had had its own fair share of criticism and has acquired its own antonym *distant reading*, coined by a literary theorist Franco Moretti (2000:57), refusing the “richness of the singular literary text” (Love, 2010:374). Instead, Moretti (2000) is arguing for the text analysis in quantitative terms by turning them into data and by obtaining *knowledge* through the maintained *distance*. His reasoning seems to rely on the stand which fits into Haraway’s description of ‘god trick’, a positivist objective truth claim (Lykke, 2010; Bode, 2012) of seeing better from a distant, and disinterested position (Haraway, 1991).

By all means, in order to justify my chosen methodology in a scholarly way, I must equally acknowledge its limitations. It is natural that my own interpretation will also limit the analysis, based on my epistemologies. Visual representations are, in the words of art and cultural studies scholars Rosemarie Buikema and Marta Zarzycka (2011), “forever subject to intermedial

applications and understandings” (p.129). What is more, as noted in the *Feminist Methodology* conveyed by scholars Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland (2002), I am a privileged researcher, therefore the hierarchical relationship between me and the researched ‘experience-based’ analytical material must be reflected upon. In other words, my privilege, allows me to decide “what differences exist, what they mean, whether they matter, and how they should be represented in research findings” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:104). It is unavoidable for me to leave the subjectivity aside and the risk of the distant ‘knowing self’ and the ‘other’ is evident, therefore, I will employ my reflexivity into the analysis.

All in all, I understand the combination of close reading and visual analysis methods to be unique, in a sense, that my own interpretation based on my positionality and location will allow me to perform a close, visual and critical, not a distant analysis. After all, it is the sensibility with regards to power relations and subjectification/subjectivity, as well as the plurality of methods what makes the research feminist (Lykke, 2010).

2.5. Situated Knowledges and Positionality

The knowledge production in a research project is a demanding task. What is more demanding however, is for this feminist knowledge to be treated as “authoritative” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:151), especially when subjectivity has been seen as “muddying the waters of a clean, clear, objective knowledge” (p. 52). For the feminist theorist Donna Haraway, the presumption of neutral observation arises from a belief in “faceless, bodiless and contextless knower”, who is detached from the world and is in an “elevated position of surveillance” (Lykke, 2010:4-5). Haraway objects to the positivist ‘god-trick’ or both pretentious totalist and relativist perspectives, as both fraudulently promises a view from nowhere. Instead she argues for a *partial objectivity*, with the researcher in ‘*medias res*’ of the researched subject and the researcher’s situatedness (Lykke, 201:5; Haraway, 1991:189-191). The more truthful situation of partial objectivity and situated knowledge production can be reached only if the researcher is able to reflect on their ‘siting’-positionality in terms of time, space, body, history and intersecting power relations and ‘sighting’-the “optics through which the research object is constructed” (Lykke, 2012:152). In order to prevent the “gaze from nowhere” (Haraway,1991:188), I will follow Haraway’s advice in

reflecting on my positionality and embeddedness as well as the research technologies in relation to my epistemology and the limits to my own knowledge production.

For the purposes of situating my interests in this thesis, I align myself with the scholarly feminist traditions following from Donna Haraway's and Adrienne Rich's "politics of location". To Rich, this entails a specific bodily cartography, of making oneself aware of bodily markers on one's own body, how they are read-off bodies, and what effects they have in society. Rich (1984) writes "To locate myself in the body means [...] recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go" (p.205-216). Indeed, my white skin and my middle class background gave me a 'friendly foreigner's' rather than 'immigrant's' status in another European country. My body, fitting into the category of 'able-bodied' with the assigned meanings of 'healthy', and 'physically strong' by Merriam-Webster (n.d.), placed me into the side of 'social majority'. Despite this box ticking of the social majority checklist, which I mean in an ironical way, my relocation to a different country brought the feeling of 'otherness' instantly, in terms of cultural differences and language/s barrier. My space was and still is, surrounded by several languages used every day: Catalan Sign Language (CSL), Catalan and Spanish, which motivated me to seek knowledge for communication purposes. I ended up, speaking some Catalan by attending the classes of CSL first, being the only non - Catalan speaker in class, becoming another 'other' together with the Deaf teacher, during the small talks of the peers in their mother tongue. Learning CSL not only deconstructed some of the personal biases and stereotypes that I carried with me previously, but also allowed me to understand the perceptions from the Catalan Deaf community's point of view towards the ignorance of the hearing world.

So to be clear from the start, I do have a strong personal relationship with the Catalan Deaf community today, and even though I do not form a part of the Deaf community, I do not consider myself as a complete "outsider" either. Perhaps, I am more of an "outsider within" to deploy the concept coined by the US American Black feminist and intersectionality theorist Patricia Hill Collins (2000:283). My situatedness within the chosen topic places me in a certain position of power in terms of my own experiences and subjectivity, therefore, 'keeping my back turned on myself' (Aull Davies, 2008) is a crucial part of the project. Since my point of departure in this study focuses on material produced by the members of Deaf community, which I am not the part

of, my personal experiences within the community results my interpretation and analysis to be perceived as an ‘outsider within’. Hence, my interpretation will depend on the part of reality which has been influenced by my way of ‘seeing’ and my ‘location’ (Lykke, 2010:5). It all goes to show that I do not aim to provide an interpretation fitting into the binary scale of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, instead it is open and inviting to ‘other voices’ and further discussion (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:115).

In this section I have presented the historical background on the emergence of Deaf identity and elaborated on its relation with disability discourse and the construction of the *other*. I have as well discussed the significance of the visual within the Deaf culture. Having argued for my chosen methods and limitations as well as my own situatedness within the topic, I will now move on the next chapter of the thesis.

Previous research

In the following chapter I will present the previous research surrounding the Deaf humor and its importance within the Deaf community. I will then introduce different perspectives of Deaf humor, such as linguistic, visual, humor about the inability to hear and the final, zap stories, which will also be my departure point in the analysis. Finally, I will conclude the previous research section by identifying the similarities and the gaps among the literature.

3.1. Deaf Humor

Deaf people are often seen through the pity lens due to the missing sense: hearing (Bienvenu, 1994). However, jokingly, Deaf studies scholar M.J. Bienvenu calls such belief a “fallacy” as Deaf people have an “added sense- a sense of humor” (p.16). The existing research on Deaf community includes Deaf humor as an important asset, allowing the late community joiners to share their experiences between other members (Suttone-Spence & Napoli, 2012:312). The Deaf experiences in the hearing world, as noted by another Deaf studies scholar Susan Rutherford (1983) are often persecuted by “daily communication frustration, as well as societal prejudices and the collective oppression of Deaf people” (p.313). While the ‘DEAF WORLD’ is assumed to be a minority

culture, situated “within the majority [oral] culture, (Bahan, 2006:22), Deaf community offers a space in which d/Deaf can feel equal instead of having to adopt to the world which is “created by and for hearing people” (Hamil & Stein, 2011:390). For this reason, humor within Deaf community is used to support the “Deaf in-group” in order to involve the new members to the community as well as to attack the” out- groups”, such as the hearing society or deaf people who “reject their deafness or their cultural inheritance” (Suttone- Spence & Napoli, 2012:313).

3.2. Deaf Humor from a Linguistic Perspective

The existing literature on the Deaf humor and its perception through the linguistic side, highlights some of the parameters of the sign language used to create the joke. Bienvenu (1994) states that ASL, or any other sign language in fact, can be played in various ways by combining puns and creating unique syntactic structures by ‘producing/misproducing’ some of the signs as well as creating words and developing punch lines (p. 20). The linguists, such as Rachel Suttone-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli (2012) develop on the production of the new visual signs further, adding the role of ‘classifiers’ which refer to the hand/s movement visually representing size, shape, a movement or location of the ‘entities’ (p.315). What is more, the elicitation of laughter is also encouraged by the embodiment of the character in the joke, using the exaggerated facial expressions or “unusually big or small signs” (p.316). Thus, the change in any of the parameters such as: hand shape, palm orientation, movement and place of articulation, constructing the language, can easily change the meaning of the sign (Rutherford, 1983:311) and create a new one, for instance, in a humorous discourse.

Another important linguistic parameter is bilingual sign language humor, which requires both, the sign language and spoken language knowledge in order to grasp it. Rutherford (1983) and Suttone-Spence & Napoli (2012) illustrate a bilingual joke with a following example:

A Deaf man was driving along and stopped at some train tracks because the crossing signal gates were down. He waited for a long time, but no train came. The man decided to get out of the car and walk to the booth where there was a man who controlled the crossing gates. He was talking on the phone. The Deaf man wrote, “Please b-u-t,” and gave the paper to

the controller. The controller looked back at the Deaf person and didn't understand, "Please but? What?" (Suttone-Spence & Napoli, 2012:324)

The signs 'but' and 'open-crossing-gates' are very similar in ASL causing the confusion for the Deaf man to choose the correct word from the English glossary (Suttone-Spence & Napoli, 2012:324, Rutherford, 1983:315). While such joke could be seen as an 'insider' as it cannot be translated (Suttone-Spence & Napoli, 2012), it also highlights the "linguistically and culturally distinctive systems" (Perez & Klimkova, 2016:111).

A study conveyed by scholars of communication and learning disorders, speech language and behavioral health, Nwokah, Burnette & Graves (2013) aimed to examine humor apprehension and expression among school- aged, hearing and deaf children, by focusing on the abilities of joke telling, story creation and re-telling of a funny movie. The study relied on the previous research, noting down the frustrating experiences of the deaf between the hearing, in terms of inability to hear the hearing co-workers and inexistence of the "real conversations" (p.74). However, the argument does not make any notation whether the deaf in this context are sign language users or not, making it rather a generalized claim. Furthermore, the majority of the deaf participants in the study were children using hearing aids and/or cochlear implants (p.75) and the findings of the study claimed the children with the hearing loss to produce utterances which were "shorter and less grammatically complex"(p.79) in comparison to the children with "typical hearing" (p.84). Finally, the study concludes the jokes produced by the children with the hearing loss as not being considered funny to an adult listener (p.89) and that more support should be provided for the linguistic aspects of humor production for deaf children (p.91). This conclusion should not go unchallenged due to the generalizations made, based on deaf children's linguistic competence in being able to construct as complex utterances as the "typical hearing" peers, without taking into consideration whether the deaf children were also bilingual as well as reflecting on the possible linguistic and cultural differences. As scholar in Sign Language studies Danielle Sanders (1986) points out, the ability of humor expression is linked to the language acquisition in two ways: the process of language acquisition and the acquired language itself (p.60). That being said, the way in which humor is told within the d/Deaf and hearing community differs by deaf jokes being more 'concrete' (p.61) in comparison to the jokes produced by the hearing.

3.3. Deaf Humor from a Visual Perspective

Deaf languages and the visual expression are interconnected in the Deaf culture (Suttone-Spence & Napoli, 2012:112) and in the words of Bienvenu's (1994), Deaf people "depend on [their] eyes for most things, and humor is no exception" (p.17). Through the practices of storytelling, Deaf people are able to recreate and describe the life around them by imitating the characters in detail, thus creating humorous scenes which sometimes can be understood in negative and insulting way by the 'outsiders' of the group (p.18). Another important source of visual humor is transmitted through media: movies, cartoons or comic strips (Perez & Klimkova, 2016, Luckner & Yarger, 1997, Bienvenu, 1994). Luckner & Yarger (1997) investigated the differences between the deaf, hard of hearing and hearing children in terms of humor appreciation through cartoons, not containing any text. The study did not find major differences between humor appreciation through cartoons among the selected groups of children, possibly due to the inner sense of something being funny or not (p.377). A deeper thought on the use of comic cartoons and comic strips has been proposed by scholars Perez & Klimkova (2016), arguing for their use to establish a "dialogue that has been lacking" (p.112) between the Deaf and the hearing society. Their produced survey to the Slovak hearing society aimed to identify possible taboos about the Deaf community with the use of the comic strips, capturing some of the stereotypes about the Deaf. As a result, the study found several repeating themes concerning Deaf people personal and family lives as well as identification within the Deaf community as the areas of interest for the hearing, however, the majority of participants thought the direct approach to Deaf for more information would be "inappropriate, offensive or unwelcome" (ibid.). Perez & Klimkova suggest that such fears from the hearing society's point of view is caused by the lack of information, making them the taboo topics (ibid).

3.4. Deaf Humor on Hearing Loss

Laughing from deafness as the inability to hear is a common topic occurring in the Deaf humor (Bienvenu, 1994). However, in order for such humor to be accepted in the Deaf community, it should reflect the deafness as an advantage, rather than the disadvantage constructed by the lack of hearing sense (Bienvenue, 1994, Hamill & Stein, 2011). In fact, such humor, describing the Deaf from the advantageous perspective aims to increase the "collective self- esteem" and "abate self-

stigma”, by “finding amusement and success in the very condition that the dominant culture pities us for” (Hamill & Stein,2011:399). An instance of this humor can be recognized in the following story:

A Deaf couple has just arrived at the motel for their honeymoon They start unpacking for the night, and then the nervous husband goes out to get a drink. When he returns to the motel, he realizes that he has forgotten his room number. Because it is dark outside and all the rooms look alike, he walks out to his car and continues to honk the horn until the rooms start lighting up with angry hearing boarders who were awakened by the noise- all but one room, where his Deaf wife is waiting for him! (Bienvenu,1994:19)

This joke demonstrates the inability to hear being turned into an successful solution to a problem: by honking the horn, the Deaf husband attracts the attention from all the hearing people at the motel and consequently, by applying the elimination method, finds his room. The *Honeymoon Hotel* joke is one out of many existing Deaf folktales using deafness as an advantage in a creative, problem-solving way. This type of humor provides a different perspective as well as contrasts the commonly perceived disadvantageous meaning of deafness and presents it favorably.

3.5. Deaf Humor as Zap Stories

Returning back to the claim that Deaf community is considered as the minority within the hearing majority, another common feature in the Deaf humor is the target of the hearing society. Bienvenu (1994) calls such humor ‘zap stories’ (p.20), which capture the Deaf frustrations and stereotypical experiences with the hearing, with “Deaf people getting even” (p.20) and “fighting back against the majority group” (Perez & Klimkova, 2016:109) . According to Hal (1989, in Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012), most Deaf people like this type of humor, where hearing people are “making idiots out of themselves” (p.313). To put it as an example, Bienvenu (1994) turns a commonly asked question “Can you read my lips?” inside out with “Can you read my hands?” to illustrate her point of “serving them [the hearing people] right” (p.20-21). Rutherford (1983) agrees with the observation from Martineau (1972:116, in Rutherford,1983) about humor originating from the ‘in-groups’ towards the ‘out-groups’ – hearing people in this sense , depicted in a depreciative way, serving as a benefit for the in-group’s ability to “control in-group behavior” as well as “solidify

the in-group” (p.317). What is more, Martineau also argues that it allows to “introduce or foster a conflict already present in the group” as well as “foster demoralization and social disintegration of the group” (p.317-318). Since Deaf humor is deeply rooted in the Deaf culture, which is surrounded by the hearing society, it is important to note that humor does not function as a separate tool and cannot be separated from the culture. Instead, in the relationship between the Deaf and the hearing worlds, it functions as a tool of communication (Perez & Klimkova, 2016:110) as well as the response to oppression (Bienvenu,1994).

3.6. Previous Research: Repetitions and Gaps

Most, although little, of the existing literature and research on Deaf humor tackles the topic from a cultural perspective. While strongly embedded in the Deaf culture, humor appears to be a needed tool, serving to communicate with the ‘in-side’ as well as the ‘out-side’ groups, share common feelings and frustrations within the community and strengthen the collective as well as personal identity. The different perspectives on Deaf humor, as discussed above, are related to one another and their meanings cannot make sense if detached from the culture. Starting from the point that the existing literature mainly describes the different types of Deaf humor patterns, it is here that I would like to further analyze the effects and reactions of the zap stories, or in other words, Deaf humor for and about the hearing society.

Theoretical Approach

Having identified some key concepts regarding the existing literature about Deaf humor and identifying some similarities and gaps, I will now introduce the theoretical approach to the analysis. Firstly, I will provide a brief overview of the classical humor theories. Following that, I will introduce the reversal humor theory and discuss the theoretical concepts of disclosure and distortion humor.

4.1. Classical Humor Theories

Laughter, according to philosopher John Morreall (1998) is not an emotion itself, but a behavior connected to emotions. As laughter is a reactive behavior to diverse situations and a single comprehensive theory developing on all the possible laughter instances seems improbable, Morreall emphasizes on three classical humor theories which, although lack comprehensiveness, facilitate the different types of laughter conceptualizations.

The first and the oldest one, *Superiority Theory*, originated from several classical philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, explaining laughter as deriving from “feelings of superiority over other people” (Critchley, 2002:3). For Plato, the target of laughter was “human evil and folly” (Morreall, 1998: 4) as a result of self- ignorance. The latter, led to the construction of the laughable person, “who thinks of himself as wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is” (cited in Morreall, 1998:4). Neither Plato nor Aristotle considered laughter to be a cultivate practice, in fact, laughing at the laughable object was considered as a malice and a “pain in the soul” (p.4) as well as an “educated insolence” (p.5). The 17th century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes reinforced the superiority theory by developing on the concept of ridicule as laughter at oneself: “a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (cited in Morreall,1998:6). In modern research, the Hobbesian “sudden glory” has been applied by Critchley (2003) in attempt to explain the ethnic humor as well as by sociologist Christie Davies (1990) describing the humor targeted at particular nationality or subculture (in Martin & Ford, 2018:48). While the theory of

disparagement at others is understood as provoking aggressive and hostile humor (p.49), the advocates of the theory, such as speech communication scholar, Charles Gruner (2017) argues that all humor can be explained by “superiority-disparagement-aggressive theory” (p.40). In fact, Gruner does not see it as “real” aggression, instead he claims it to be “playful”, as a competition between one’s own and another person’s past (Martin & Ford, 2018:47-50). Within theories of social identity, superiority theory is used to explain the categorization of in-groups and out-groups as well as enhance “social identity or in-group pride” through the disparagement of the out-groups (p.266). By the same token, Gruner’s (2017) argued *playful competition* in superiority theory, becomes visible when it is used as a subversion of absurd prejudices of the oppressed groups, exposed through irony and ridicule (Martin & Ford, 2018:278). The subversive use of disparagement humor thus aims to reinforce the in-groups’ “pride or solidarity”, critically reflect on the already assigned “stereotypes and slurs” as well as set a reminder of the “status quo of inequality and discrimination” (p.279).

The second classical humor theory is *Incongruity Theory*, which was developed by Frances Hutcheson, a 18th century philosopher as a response to Hobbes’s necessity to compare oneself to others in superiority theory (McDonald, 2012). Rather than expressing laughter arising from the superior feelings over others, incongruity theory elaborates it as “an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some other way” (Morreall, 1998:15). To provide an instance of the theory, Morreall (2009) makes a parallel with the human experience as following the already learnt patterns, meaning: “What we have experienced, prepares us to deal with what we will experience (p.10). Thus, the amusement appears once the pattern and the expectations are disrupted, becoming out of ordinary and irrational. However, incongruity by itself is not enough to justify the theory. Incongruity must be “resolved or make sense” and perceived in a “non serious humor mindset” (Martin & Ford, 2018:56). That being said, humor appears only when the conflict is resolved either with the information provided in the joke or by the general knowledge of the listener (McDonald, 2012:61). However, according to McDonald, such structural incongruity is problematic as it clearly privileges the “structure of humor over the content” (p.58), meaning that some jokes are funnier over others due to their repeated joke structure, as the instances of such, being *knock knock jokes* (ibid.). What is more, incongruity theory itself cannot

account for all types of humor as “not all incongruities are funny” (ibid.) and certainly the unresolved incongruities will not result any pleasure.

Something that had been left out by both superiority and incongruity theories were physical phenomenon of laughter and its relation to the nervous system, which was developed in the third classical humor theory, *Relief Theory* (Morreall, 2009:15-16). Formulated by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer in the beginning of the 19th century, the theory began by focusing on the nervous energy release through laughter (McDonald, 2012). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Sigmund Freud elaborated on the relief theory by replacing the nervous with the psychic energy release through jokes (or wit), humor and the comic (McDonald, 2012, Martin & Ford, 2018:39). Freud’s psychoanalytical approach understood laughter to be a system allowing to express taboo feelings, repressed in the unconscious and released through jokes (McDonald, 2012:68). More precisely, Freud understood humor to be childish, however acceptable in the adult life as a response to the irrational behavior, therefore becoming, as McDonald puts it “an act of transgression against the authority” (p.71). The relationship between authority and humor had been developed by a philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his classic work *Rabelais and His World* (1984). The concept of *carnavalesque laughter* and its performance as societally subversive, similarly like Freud’s concept on childish humor, focused on including and laughing at everyone, reversing the social hierarchies and turning everything upside down (Lundberg, 2016). As pointed out by McDonald (2012), carnivalesque laughter is “very much the people’s humor in that it proclaims the voice of the ordinary folk in opposition to the powers- that-be” (p.73).

4.2. Reversal Humor Theory: Disclosure and Distortion Humor

In attempts of formulating humor into a theoretical framework, several researchers had not considered social context to be influential for the effect of joke (Martin & Ford, 2018; Sampietro, 2014). The general theory of personality and motivation, known as *Reversal Theory* conveyed by psychologist Michael Apter (1982) also developed a more comprehensive formula of explaining humor as well as focusing on the social context in which it appears (Martin & Ford, 2018). Similarly like Gruner (2017), Apter and Desselles (2012) explained that humor occurs when the listener is in a playful state of mind, also known as *paratelic state*, whereas humour appearing in

the serious state of mind (*telic state*), would be understood as irritating, offensive or threatening (p.418-419). Apart from the state of mind feature, which is necessary at the moment of joke acceptance, Apter's and Desselles' formula brings a second feature- cognitive synergy, by reversing Aristotelian Law of Identity ($a=a$) with "two contradictory interpretations" of the identity at the same time (Martin & Ford, 2018:74, Apter & Desselles, 2012:419). The final feature for the synergy to be comic according to Apter and Desselles (2012), is diminishment: "the identity involved must be diminished or downgraded in some way" (p.419). What is different from superiority and incongruity theories is that diminishment does not need to be aggressive and the incongruity does not need to be solved. Instead, cognitive synergy and diminishment are linked with one another when producing humor (Martin & Ford, 2018).

In case of diminishment of identity, Apter and Desselles (2012) distinguish between *disclosure* and *distortion humor*, both related to a "different aspect of an identity" (p.432). The former is related to the interpretation of an identity as having different characteristics from the obvious ones, causing the diminishment of the identity through the new interpretation. *Distortion humor*, on the other hand, is evident when new characteristics are added or modified in comparison to the real ones, making the identity "diminished through absurdity" (p.423-424). In other words, disclosure humor removes the obvious characteristic of an identity and replaces it with new interpretation, playing with ambiguity and letting the observer to discover the unexpected (p. 432-433). Distortion humor adds new characteristic to the obvious one through creative and imaginative exaggeration of it, allowing the observer grasp the new creation from the "raw materials of an identity" (ibid.). Traditionally, according to Apter and Desselles (2012), disclosure humor is linked with *transitional* synergy, meaning that the real or the apparent characteristic of identity appears first and becomes diminished through transition, perceiving the diminished characteristic as a new reality. An example of transitional disclosure humor could be found in cartoons or comic strips (p.427). *Non- transitional* synergy, often transmitted through distortion humor, occurs when both the real and the apparent characteristics of identity emerge simultaneously, for instance in the case of a caricatures or comic characters (p.428). Nevertheless, despite the traditional fit between disclosure humor and transitional synergy as well as distortion humor and non-transitional synergy, these dichotomies, such as transitional-distortion or non-transitional- disclosure can as well be combined among them, depending on the comic situations (ibid.).

Having completed my theoretical exposé and constructed a toolkit of sorts for my analysis, I shall now bring it to the analysis of the cases selected for this paper.

Analysis and Results

This section of the thesis will present the analysis and the results of both: short film *The Kiss* and the series of images from the graphical novel *Tais*. From the ethical stance, both the film and the series of images had been uploaded to a public domain: Youtube and a public Instagram channel, thus not requiring any membership in order to access it as well as making it available for the research purposes (Poynter, 2010). The analysis will be divided into two parts, beginning with the analysis of the film and finalizing with the graphical images. Each case will be viewed through the lens of close reading and visual analysis, adding interpretation of the humorous discourse and applying the theoretical toolkit presented in the previous section.

5.1. Analysis and Results of *The Kiss*

The Kiss is a short film directed by filmmaker and journalist Charlie Swinbourne, premiered first at Bradford International Film Festival and holding awards for Best Film and Script in the Festival of Deaf Arts and Films in Basque Region, Spain in 2014. The film had been uploaded on the director's Youtube channel and has counted over 85,000 views today. The story is told in two languages : spoken English and British Sign Language (BSL), accompanied by the English subtitles. *The Kiss* represents an unusual encounter between a Deaf and a hearing couple, which fits into Bienvenu's (1994) "Deaf people getting even" (p.20) type of humor. Some of the conversations of the film will be transcribed in the analysis, using the multimodal transcription format (Norris, 2004): Utterances – in *italics*, Descriptions- (in parenthesis), Overlapping actions- [indicated in the brackets].

The film begins with Ben's and Chloe's blind date scene at the café. In order to brake the slightly anxious atmosphere, Ben puts on his talking hat and engages in asking Chloe about her hobbies. The conversation mainly led by Ben maintains the uncomfortable tension which is interrupted by

Ben's attempt in asking some sugar from the couple sitting at next table. Ben's ignored request is following by a second try, involving hand clapping and finger pointing to the direction of sugar. Ben gives up trying and shares his disappointment: "*That's a bit bloody rude!*" (1:19). Chloe gives another glance at the *rude* couple and notices that the couple is deaf. Ben's reaction changes immediately and the conversation takes a different turn:

(1:25- 1:51)

- (1) *Ben*: [sighs and leans backwards to his chair] *Oh wow!* [stares back at the Deaf couple]. *That's amazing.* (tells Ben looking at Chloe and staring back to the Deaf couple again).
- (2) *Chloe*: *I've always wished I could sign.*
- (3) *Ben*: *Actually, I know one sign!* [raises his eyebrows and nods his head down]
- (4) *Chloe*: *Oh yeah? What's that?*
- (5) *Ben*: [makes a sign] (The camera blurs out the Deaf couple in the background as they look right at Ben)
- (6) *Chloe*: [laughs] *Wow! What does that mean?* (asks Chloe smilingly)
- (7) *Ben*: [puts his hand together and raises his eyebrows] *Bullshit. It means bullshit.* (looks back at the Deaf couple uncomfortably)
- (8) *Chloe*: [the smile slightly disappears] (Chloe stares back at Ben with no words)
- (9) *Deaf couple*: [the man covers his face with one hand meanwhile the Deaf woman stares at Deaf man emotionless]



Fig.1. Still from Swinbourne, *The Kiss* (1:40)

This excerpt demonstrates an interesting shift between emotions from the hearing characters. At first, the non-responsiveness from the Deaf couple is described as ‘*rude*’ and once the reason of non-responsiveness is discovered (deafness), it becomes ‘*amazing*’. The concept of ‘otherness’ is introduced from the hearing characters and sign language is seen as something exotic, something that attracts and gives attention. Ben’s willingness to impress Chloe with his knowledge of one sign leads to an absurd and even more uncomfortable moment, once the meaning of the sign is revealed. Discomfort feeling is evident, the smile on Chloe’s face is fading and Deaf couple’s gaze at Ben appears fixed and expressionless for a moment.

Ben apologises the Deaf couple without getting any response or acceptance from them and asks for the sugar. The Deaf couple keeps on observing Ben while passing the sugar and continue their conversation while Ben leans back to his table. Few seconds later, Ben initiates the conversation again:

2:18- 2:44

(10) *Ben*: [leans towards the Deaf couple] *Excuse me, I have to say... sign language...*

[moves his hands apart with palms widely spread] signing... [moves his hands in circles, up and down]. *It’s beautiful*. [moves his hand in one side in affirmation].

(11) *Deaf man*: *The way you speak...is beautiful! The way you talk* [ironically exaggerating the actions of speaking, by moving two hands representing the action of talking] *Wow!* [shaking hands back and forth rapidly], [showing thumbs up].

(12) *Ben*: *Thanks!* (He looks back at Chloe smilingly and nodding his head in acceptance of the ‘compliment’)

(13) *Deaf man*: *No, no, no...* (telling his partner and discussing internally)

(14) *Ben*: [smiling widely] (he looks at Chloe and then back to the Deaf couple, as if waiting for the conversation to continue).

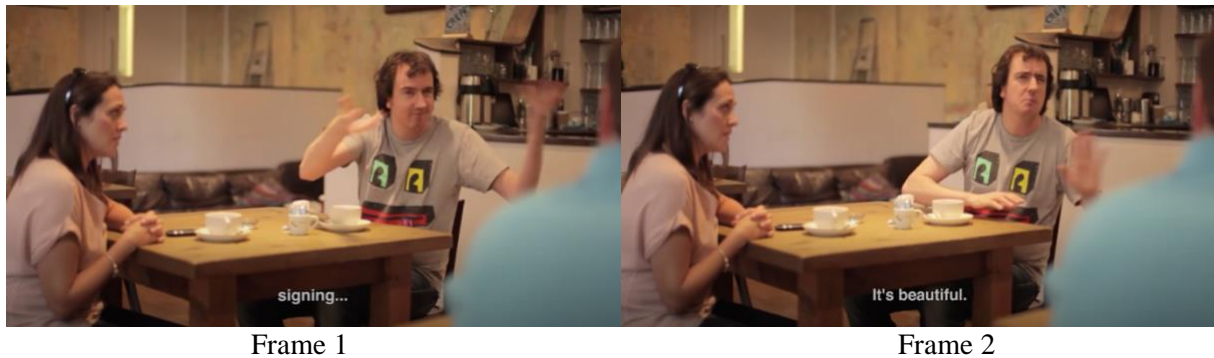


Fig.2. Still from Swinbourne, *The Kiss* (2:21- 2:24)



Fig.3. Still from Swinbourne, *The Kiss* (2:32- 2:35)

Ben's attempt to compliment sign language by using the hand gestures similar to an orchestra conductor (Fig.2, Frame 2) is greeted and reversed with an ironic response from the Deaf man, followed by an exaggerated hand gestures, representing the *blah-blah gesture* (Fig.3, Frame 1)- a replica of a chatty mouth, which is commonly used in social context to present a sense of irritation. The ironical evaluation of Ben's ability to speak is misunderstood by Ben himself as he simply replies: "*Thanks*" (2:37), implying the literal understanding of Deaf man's statement. While it is evident for the viewer that Deaf man's statement does not really make sense in this context, the viewer of the film might imply a contrary meaning. As pointed out by Martin and Ford (2018), both meanings are left for a comparison and the incongruity between both of them, "causes the irony to be humorous" (p.149). This irony could also be explained through Gruner's advocated superiority humor theory: a sense of competition can be seen within the ironical Deaf man's response as well as the repeated and slightly discreet: "*No, no, no..*" (2:39)- suggesting the feeling

of unbearableness with Ben. Gruner (2017) argues that every humorous situation has a winner and a loser (p.9). Thus, Ben's unnecessary reaction and ignorance can be understood as fitting into the role of a loser in this context.

After discovering that Ben and Chloe have just met, the Deaf couple engages with their ignorance and decides to provide a memorable experience. The Deaf woman suggests Ben and Chloe kiss each other in order to reduce the stiffness. Both Ben and Chloe react to the suggestion surprised and uncertain about the proposal. Deaf couple encourages Ben and Chloe to give it a try, which makes Ben rhetorically ask Chloe whether "*It must be like a deaf custom or something?*" (3:38), to which Chloe has no answer and rather remains sitting silent, in hesitation. The Deaf couple encourages them once again, Ben takes the lead in giving Chloe a kiss, to which she reacts in disgust. Deaf couple congratulates and invites them to observe a *deaf kiss*. The Deaf couple move the objects on their table away, touch their hands and wrap their fingers in between each other's hands. They close their eyes and engage in a passionate hands movement while smiling, and slightly moving their lips (Fig.4, Frame 1). Ben and Chloe keep on observing the Deaf couple speechless. (Fig. 4, Frame 2).

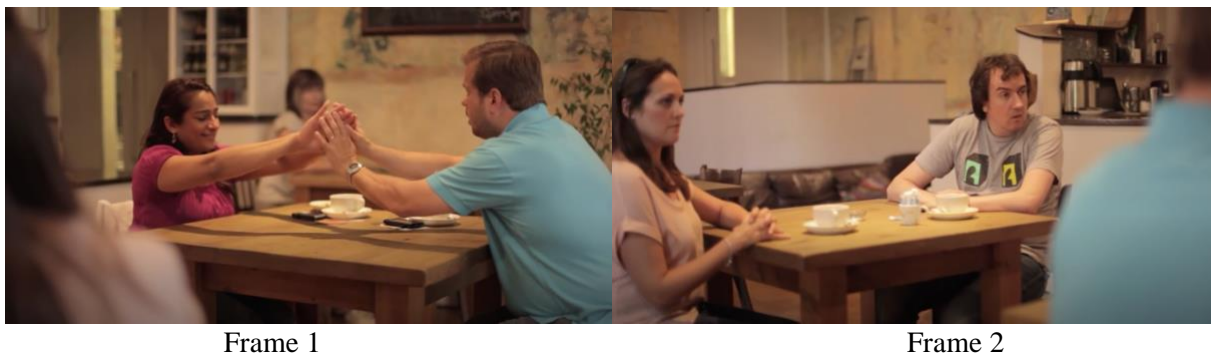


Fig.4. Still from Swinbourne, *The Kiss* (4:32- 4:35)

The *deaf kiss* lasts for almost a minute during which Chloe and Ben look at each other and at the Deaf couple without saying anything. Once it is over, the Deaf man proudly tells them: "*That's a deaf kiss!*" (5:32). Chloe and Ben do not respond and remain emotionless instead. The Deaf couple decides to leave, which leaves Ben and Chloe alone. Ben reflects on the kiss by describing it as "*an experience!*" (6:05) and suggests Chloe trying it one day. Their date ends by Chloe being unable

to bear with him anymore and leaving the café quickly. Outside, Chloe observes Deaf couple leaving:

6:28- 6:34

(8) *Deaf woman*: (outside telling her partner) *You're terrible!* [laughing]

(9) *Deaf man*: [laughing] *That was the worst ever!*

(10) *Chloe*: (outside observing the Deaf couple leaving the café, hugging, and stopping to give each other a kiss on the lips)

(11) *Chloe*: [smiles] (walks away)

The last scene clearly summarizes the motive behind the zap story. Deaf man also expresses the need of 'teaching them a lesson' by claiming that Ben's behavior was "*the worst ever*" (6:33). The initial kiss suggestion proposed by the Deaf couple and Ben's assumption of it being a 'deaf custom' marks the subversive disparagement humor taking place: the roles become reversed as the Deaf couple take the conversation into control and ridicule the hearing characters. Smiling, according to Critchley (2002), although differs from explosive laughter, it brings a comic relief "signifying a break in our usual flow of inhibitions" (p.108) and Chloe's smile at the end of the film marks exactly that. It reveals her understanding and acceptance of being mocked, which can also be perceived as a social corrective. Viewed through the superiority theory, the type of ironic humor used in the film can be seen as a way of addressing "ignorant actions on the part of the others" (Meyer, 2000:314), resulting the Deaf couple's victory.

Zooming in on the 'deaf kiss' itself and the idea of it as being different implies both types of humor: disclosure and distortion, meaning that the identities are diminished through the apparent and real synergy (Apter & Desselles, 2012:433). Firstly, the pre- Deaf-kiss scene brings up the usual expectation of what a kiss between two people looks like, yet Ben's and Chloe's faces show some ambiguity. They seem intrigued by the fact that they are about to see a *deaf kiss*. The observers of the kiss, Ben and Chloe, discover the new "real" characteristic of the deaf kiss: being performed through the passionate engagement of hands. This surprising and transitional revelation of the "new characteristic" diminishes the synergy through disclosure humor. However, the 'deaf kiss' also appears as a caricature of the Deaf identity in a way, which is expressed through distortion humor (Apter & Desselles, 2012:424). The sarcastic act of deaf kiss performed by the

touch of the hands instead of lips becomes the “diminishing distortion of the reality” (ibid.). Chloe’s and Ben’s surprise at the end of the deaf kiss diminishes their own synergies, as surprise, according to Apter and Desselles (2012) results in downgrading the identity as “not seeing it coming” (p.430). The incongruity and a sense of surprise appearing in the last scene is resolved by the smile on Chloe’s face as she finally understands the trick.

Swinbourne’s film *The Kiss* fits under Bienvenu’s (1994) “Deaf people getting even” (p.20) humor category. By creating the shift from expected to unexpected and by adding ambiguity in such an ordinary action as kissing, the roles become playfully reversed, applying humor as a social corrective tool. Having completed the analysis of *The Kiss*, I shall now move on to analyze the series of images from the graphical novel *Tais* in the following section.

5.2. Analysis and Results of *Tais*

Tais identifies herself as Deaf and Woman. She has joined social media at the end of 2018 and has been sharing her experiences with her followers in Catalan, Spanish, English and Dutch. She is a feminist whose attempt is to show her world from an intersectional perspective. Her creator and a Catalan Deaf artist Alícia Sort Leal has released a very own *Tais* book which has been presented in several books and comic expositions as well as cultural events in Barcelona, Brussels and Groningen. For this thesis, I have decided to select four images, which were posted on *Tais* Instagram and Facebook pages, capturing the everyday Deaf experiences in the hearing world. I will begin the analysis with the first two images, situated in the context of lip-reading, a practice often assumed by the hearing society to be fairly easy (and sometimes the only) way of communication between the Deaf and the hearing.

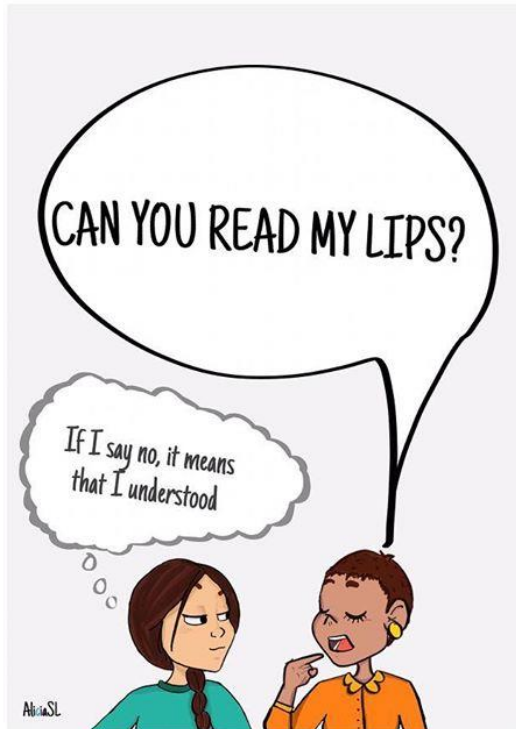


Fig. 1. (Sort Leal, 2019a)



Fig. 2. (Sort Leal, 2019c)

The first image selected for the analysis (Fig.1.) presents a woman on the right side asking Tais whether she can read her lips. Her finger pointing to her mouth, her closed eyes and the capitalization of “CAN YOU READ MY LIPS?” indicates a higher tone, adding a sense of superiority from the hearing woman’s perspective. This also suggests that the ability to communicate between the hearing woman and Tais hangs on Tais’ ability to read lips. The narrow-eyed expression of Tais suggests irritation and her revealed inner thoughts: “If I say no, it means that I understood”- shows an ambiguity in deciding whether to answer question or not. Tais’ thoughts are in line with Bienvenu’s (1994) who elaborated on the valiant approach from hearing people in attempt to start a conversation with the Deaf, eventually asking : “Can you read my lips?” (p.20). She highlights: “Well, of course Deaf people are keenly aware of the configuration of this one sentence and will always answer “No!” which is pretty funny, indeed” (ibid.). While Tais’ answer is not exactly a ‘No’, her ambiguity in answering at all brings forward the fact that she had been asked the same question repeatedly in the past. Therefore, her inner thought revealed to the viewer becomes the punch line. Applying the relief humor theoretical lens, it can be understood that although withheld inside, the irritated energy is released through the sarcastic wit, which is shared with the viewer, making the hearing woman a target of the joke.

The second image (Fig. 2.), similarly as the first one, is situated in the context of lip-reading abilities. Tais, appearing in the closer frame of the image is facing the viewer. Her eyes seem heavy and sleep deprived, with dark circles under them. She holds her head with one hand, which looks as if she is in a thoughtful and tired state of mind. Behind her, the viewer sees an exposition of twenty-four mouths, each of them differing from one another. They are wide, thin, open, closed, pierced, toothed, toothless, slobbery, smelly, keeping the tongue in and sticking it out, all belonging to different people and all requiring to be looked at. Differing from the ‘neutral’ appearance of a mouth through the distorted modification of the tiny characteristics, they embody the non-transitional synergy: the viewer recognizes being exposed to a ‘wall of mouths’ behind Tais, despite their exaggeration (Apter & Desselles, 2012). Mouths in this context belong to the hearing people and Tais’ ironic reflection: “And they said that reading lips is easy” reveals the ‘behind the scenes’ of a lip-reading attempt. The mouths are hyperbolized, bringing the concept of the grotesque body satire, exaggerating the “improper” as argued in Bakhtin’s (1981:306) carnivalesque culture. This image presents the power structures behind the assumptions of lip-reading. Mouth- being the primary departure point of oral speech creation is hyperbolized and ridiculed, reversing the logic of communication in the Deaf context. As the gender studies scholar Anna Lundberg (2006) points out, carnivalesque laughter: “produces something new, touches on something not yet seen or heard” (p.117), which can be applied in this case: the commonly used assumption about lip-reading as a rather simple tool of communication between Deaf and hearing is brought closer, showing something, perhaps not yet something seen or heard about, for the hearing viewer. In fact, by gazing at the image, the hearing viewer is offered a chance to practice lip reading at first hand.

Shifting to the analysis of the final two images from *Tais* graphical novel, it is worth to mention that as in the previous analysis of the first two images highlighting the assumptions associated with lip reading, the following ones also share similarities in their context. Both of the images in the last section of the analysis open the question concerning the reactions from hearing people when meeting a Deaf person for the first time.



Fig. 3. (Sort Leal,2019b)



Fig. 4. (Sort Leal,2018)

In the third image (Fig.3.), it is noticeable that Tais is absent and the viewer faces twelve hearing people, each of them reacting differently when meeting a Deaf person for the first time. The portrayed people imply various assumptions being constructed by the hearing majority about the Deaf. Tais, in this case, is bounced as a ping pong ball among different socially constructed discourses. Her ability to drive is questioned by a worried man, she is told to “speak more and sign less”, her deafness is being sympathized by making her “poor girl”- all these expressions presenting the medicalized and disabling point of view. A sense of curiosity, almost *exotic otherness* can be understood from the capitalized “WOW! Can you sign?” and “How is HELLO?” as well as the continuing observation and sexual gaze of never having “done it with a deaf person”. Tais is being looked at skeptically as she doesn’t “look deaf”- bringing yet another construction of the “expected deaf look”. Another set of examples demonstrating hearing ignorance can be observed from an attempt to find a common topic, such as informing about the “deaf uncle’s cousin” or replying in a different language. Finally, a loss of speech is presented in two images: the excuse to leave with a terrified face and an interjection “Ah...I have to go” as well as the thunder-struck expression, turning the character into stone. Tais’ absence creates a distance between the protagonist’s thoughts and the viewer, which leads the interpretation to be derived

from a direct relationship between the viewer and the depicted characters. The viewer is confronted with a mirror-like portrayal of hearing characters and their reactions to seeing a Deaf person for the first time, in this case- Tais. The portrayed characters bring the mirroring effect on the assumptions assigned to the deafness. As asserted by the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1968), joke functions only then, when it “mirrors social forms” (p.371). By mirroring these social norms, the artist challenges them by making them seen through Tais’ experience. The disparagement humor in this case functions as the subversion of the social forms and assumptions.

In the final image (Fig.4.), the viewer meets the distorted image of Tais: her hair turned into a headwear of snakes, her lifted eyebrows, halfway closed eyes and her hand rotated to an upward position, suggesting confusion. The person next to her has turned into stone after Tais’ revelation: “I JUST SAID I AM DEAF”, just as in the third image (Fig.3.). On a humorous note, considering that the fourth image (Fig.4.) was published a year earlier, it seems that Tais’ deafness revelation one year later, although attracted more reactions, still resulted in the ‘turning one into stone’ effect (Fig.3.). The diminishment in Tais’ identity through distortion and exaggeration of her physical appearance is evident: the viewer can still recognize Tais, however she is embedded in the body of the mythological Greek monster Medusa. In this case, the distortion could also be seen as transitional: although the transition does not occur in the series of images, such as comic strip or cartoon, the viewer is already aware of Tais’ appearance from previous images and the acquired appearance of Medusa diminishes her identity (Apter & Desselles:2012). In the ancient myth, Medusa had been punished for her beauty and turned into a monster by Athena. Her hair was turned into snakes and anyone looking at her would be petrified and turned into stone (Niz & Bowman, 2005). Freud’s psychoanalytical interpretation of Medusa in his 1922 essay *Medusa’s Head* linked the fear of Medusa with the castration complex :Medusa’s hair representing female genitalia and stiffness- erection (p.84-85). Freudian phallogentric symbolism embedded in the interpretation of the myth has been challenged by the French feminist poststructuralist theorist Hélène Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), in which she creates a “laughing Medusa who refuses the role she has been consigned by patriarchy” (McDonald, 2012:121). By advocating for a feminine writing, Cixous (1976) claims: “If she’s a her-she, it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter” (p.888). Cixous’ Medusa is beautiful and laughing (p.885), resisting the patriarchal

order, empowering her own voice through language and laughter. Within the concept of the laughing, Medusa becomes the mockery of the traditional interpretation of the myth, so does the distortion of Tais' identity. The comic illustration of Tais' grotesque body questions the power relations between the hearing and the Deaf. Instead of facing only patriarchal order, Tais is intersected in two identities: she is Deaf and woman, therefore her embeddedness in Medusa could be seen as both release and resistance to socially constructed beliefs about being a Deaf Woman.

The analyzed images above demonstrate two main themes in relation to Deaf experiences in the hearing world. The humorous and comic depiction of Tais' experiences with lip-reading and reactions to her Deaf identity expression, highlights socially constructed assumptions about the Deaf by the hearing majority and brings them forward to the hearing viewer. Having finalized the analysis, I shall now draw the final conclusions, which will be presented in the following and the final section of the thesis.

Conclusions

This thesis was designed to examine the use of subversive humor within the Deaf communities, with the particular focus on Deaf humor portraying the relations between the Deaf and the hearing. Through the form of a case study, I aimed to analyze the subversive humor as a tool of expression and resistance within the Deaf communities, to the frequently assigned *otherness* by the hearing majority. Choosing close reading and visual analysis as my main methods, allowed me to approach and analyze the selected cases in a close and direct way from my ‘outsider’s within’ feminist position and contribute to the knowledge production of this thesis applying my situated knowledge as opposed to the neutral observer’s. The analysis was led following the theoretical toolkit consisting of classical and contemporary humor theories, providing a flexible and wide approach to analyze humor instances in each case.

The first analyzed case, short film *The Kiss*, represents an instance of a zap story, bringing up ridiculous assumptions and false beliefs from the hearing majority about the Deaf people. These beliefs and ignorance are made visible and challenged until the “rude offender is always put in his or her place” (Bienvenu, 1994:21), resulting the victory. From the theoretical stance, the humorous situation presented in the film has been analyzed applying superiority (disparagement), incongruity and Apter’s and Desselles’ (2012) reversal disclosure and distortion humor theories. The analysis of the film reveals a sense of almost ‘exotic otherness’ introduced by the hearing couple and applied to the Deaf couple, after the immediate shift in Ben’s and Cloe’s conversation dynamics, once the deafness of the couple nearby is revealed. This ‘otherness’ is deconstructed within the sarcastic and slightly satirical tone used by the Deaf couple, resulting a playful and ironical reversal of roles between the hearing and the Deaf and serving as a social corrective.

The analysis of the second case consisting of four drawings from the graphical novel *Tais*, highlights the perception of lip-reading and hearing reactions to the Deaf as the main themes in the selected images. While none of the images appear to present a direct incongruity per se, I have analyzed the material incorporating superiority (disparagement), relief- applying Bakhtin’s (1981) carnivalesque subversive humor as well as Apter’s and Desselles’ (2012) reversal disclosure and distortion humor theories. The hearing assumptions captured in all of the drawings are given

visibility and are brought up close to the hearing viewer. The distorted and hyperbolized characteristics, such as the mouths, the ironically portrayed hearing people's first time reactions to the Deaf, including Tais' own embeddedness into a monster Medusa in the eyes of the hearing person next to her, reveal Tais' personal experiences in the hearing world, while sharing them with the hearing viewer by creating a mirror-like reflection.

Henceforth, to provide a final note on the findings of this study, the close reading as well as visual analysis of both selected materials suggest that Deaf culture indeed holds up a mirror to the hearing society and humor is one of the ways to create this reflected portrait. As noted by Critchley (2002), humor is a "form of critical social anthropology, defamiliarizing the familiar, demythologizing the exotic and inverting the world of common sense (p.65). Thus, when used as a subversive tool in the Deaf context, humor portrays and raises awareness to everyday Deaf life experiences, reinforces the Deaf identity by resisting the oppression from the dominant groups and performs as a social corrective. In other words, when used by the marginalized groups, such as Deaf communities, humor contributes to the deconstruction of 'otherness' imposed by the hegemonic groups and acts as a social mirror towards them.

Taken into an account that Deaf humor centered around the hearing society is an under-researched topic, I believe that this thesis can make a small contribution to intersectional Gender Studies. I must equally admit however, that the scope of this thesis is limited , as I have exclusively decided to explore the use of Deaf humor concerning the Deaf experiences and relations in and with the hearing world. The focus on humor deriving from and dedicated to the d/Deaf who do not identify themselves with the Deaf communities, as well as the comparison between Deaf humor and other subcultural humor has not been included in this thesis. With that in mind, I believe that future research could benefit from a focus on the subversive humor use within different intersections among d/Deaf and other subcultural groups.

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